# THE ETHICS OF ELFLAND.

THE VIOLET FAIRY BOOK. Edited by Andrew Lang. London: Longmans, Green.

In all the libraries of the world, perhaps, there is no better and more profitable reading than fairy tales: and there are few better places to read them than in Mr. Andrew Lang's series of fairy books. Folklore students as a class are a singular contrast to their dark and fascinating study; they are atrociously prosaic persons, and dissect hippogriffs and chimaeras with more coolness and inhumanity than a zoologist dissects newts or beetles. But Mr. Andrew Lang has done something more than study old wives' fables: he has enjoyed them, I was almost about to say he has believed them.

He is more than a student of the childhood of the world: he is a child. Therefore he has done the admirable work of collecting all the stories of the earth into one long library, unpolluted by information or notes or archeological researches, unrolling themselves before us without beginning or end as if told only by the voice of the one veiled and nameless story-teller, at whose feet all the nations have sat. *The Violet Fairy Book*, which is the new addition to the series, contains a particularly delightful collection. The mere names of "The Greatest Liar in the World" or "The Eater of People" are enough to awaken the elvish hunger. But while it is doubtful whether any literature ought to be criticised (except for private and financial reasons), it is quite certain that fairy tales ought not to be criticised. The hearer should either listen to them or go to sleep.

Of all forms of literature, it seems to me, fairy tales give the truest picture of life. There may be errors in detail, but in a world so full of strange things they scarcely matter. Two-headed giants and

beanstalks that climb up into the sky may not be true, but assuredly they are not too wonderful to be true. But the atmosphere of the fairy tale is astonishingly true to life. It deals with the silent witchery which lies in common substances, corn and stones and apple trees and fire. It presents these, no doubt, as magic stones and magic apple trees, and if anyone will stare at them steadily in a field at twilight he will find himself quite unable to assert that they are not magic. Let me take one quite practical example of the truth of fairy tales. In these stories success is made to depend upon a number of small material objects and observances: life is a chain of talismans. If a man touches three trees in passing he is safe: if he touches four he is ruined. If the hero meets a miller without a beard he is to answer none of his questions. If he plucks a red flower in a particular meadow he will have power over the mighty kings of some distant city. Now this poetic sense of the decisiveness of some flying detail is a thousand times more practical and genuine than the pompous insistence on some moral or scientific law which is the basis of most realistic novels. None of us know when we have done something irrevocable. Our fate has been often decided by the twist of a road or the shape of a tree. Nay, it has often been decided by an omnibus or an advertisement, and there can therefore be little reason for denying that it is a magic omnibus or a magic advertisement.

The great truth and value of the fairy-tale view of life cannot be better conveyed than by saying that it chiefly arises from the entire absence of the supernatural in fairy tales. There is no miraculous department there, nothing conceived as outrageous and exceptional, nothing that recalls crystal-gazing and the planchette. There is no trace or hint of that modern "spiritual world" which implies that this world is not spiritual. In the fairy tales, portents are orderly and inevitable, they are part of the very texture of natural life. In a place so strange as this earth it is as natural to meet griffins and witches and three-headed dogs as to meet geese and oxen. This earth of ours is conceived as a place full of innumerable marvels. A cottage door opens, and a bull walks in and asks, in the most formal

language, to be betrothed to the cottager's daughter. Such an incident would appeal to an actual person as lying somewhat outside normal experience and etiquette. But the cottager, though he regards it as astonishing, does not regard it as supernatural. It is not a proof to him of the existence of psychic phenomena, or of the inspiration of the Bible, or of the fact that he is going mad. It is simply a proof that however old a man grows, he is always younger than this wonderful world. It would be well perhaps if a wiser age could learn that simple fact. The fairy tale hero is impressed, doubtless, when the pumpkin turns into a coach or the castle soars into the air. But he is not impressed for the mean and stupid reason that he had thought that the world was prosaic. Life for him is an illimitable sea of monsters. He is often astonished, but, if I may employ the phrase, he would be more astonished if he were not astonished.

It is a great mistake to imagine that fairy tales are either immoral or unmoral. They do not tally with the trivialities of every particular moral code, but in this respect they resemble all works of art. It is not true that art is unmoral: men were driven to take so narrow a view of art merely because they already took so narrow a view of morality. In other words, art is unmoral because such a large amount of morality is immoral. The fairy tales, though they reek from end to end with theft and violence and treachery, remain as moral as Miss Edgeworth's tales. In them we see the great lines of the elementary laws and ideals as we see them nowhere else. We learn first and foremost that all doors fly open to courage and to hope. We learn that the world is bound together in mysterious bonds of trust and compact and prevision, and that even green dragons keep their promises. We learn that nothing is wasted in the mills of the world, that a jewel thrown into the sea, a kindness to a stricken bird, an idle word to a ragged wayfarer, have in them some terrible value, and are bound up with the destiny of men. Nothing is more typical and recurrent in the ethics of the fairy tale than this great idea that nothing can be lost. Three ships are swallowed by a whale, but seven

years afterwards they are disgorged, crews and all, when a talisman is touched or a word uttered. A baby is murdered and buried, but a tree grows from his dust, every leaf of which calls for his father. A secret is whispered into a hole in the ground, and a bush grows out of it: from the bush a flute is made, but the flute will only sing the words of the secret. In the extraordinarily beautiful Roumanian tale included in this volume, "The Boys with the Golden Stars," two children are murdered, they grow into two trees that talk, the trees are cut down and made into two beds that talk, they are burnt and become two fires that talk, and so on through every natural change till they become babies again. What is this but the principle which is called Immortality in theology, and in science the Conservation of Energy? Both ideas are founded upon one great conception, that the world is ruled by a sublime parsimony; that there is no such thing as a dust-bin in the house of God.

This is one very characteristic moral of fairy tales, the idea of the indestructibility of an essence or an act. Another fully as common and even more essential is the great idea which lies at the heart of the story of "Beauty and the Beast," and a hundred kindred tales; the idea that by loving a thing we make it beautiful. The fairy tale warns us above all things to be on our guard against the disguises of things, and to regard every ugly and repellent exterior with a hopeful and divine suspicion. Out of the darkness of a time older than the oldest chronicles come in such stories as "Cinderella" and "Beauty and the Beast," a sermon against snobbishness which might have been preached by Thackeray.

But all these massive fragments of primitive morality are secondary to the great moral spirit which is the very heart of the fairy tales. That spirit is the principle appearing and reappearing in a thousand folk-lore stories, that nothing can do a man harm unless he fears it. At no time in the history of civilisation, perhaps, has there been so much need to recall the ethics of the ancient warfare of Jack against the Giant, of the small against the gigantic. Those who in our day express a peculiar sympathy with the weak in their struggle

against the strong are often accused of indulging a hyper-sensitive humanitarianism unknown to the robuster ages of the world. The thing is a delusion. The sympathy for the weak against the strong speaks out of the oldest twilight: it is the very backbone of the most savage stories with which we have to deal in anthropology. For the fairy tale is only the history of man himself, at once the weakest and the strongest of the creatures. Man is the third brother of the cosmic story, conquering where the arrogant elder brothers, mammoth or ichthyosaurus, have gone to ruin. He is the "Brer Rabbit" of the universe, standing in triumphant wit and weakness upon a pile of all the failures of force. A new worship of strength and courage has arisen in our day, a cult of strength which consists in collapsing before everything that is strong, a cult of courage which consists in running away from anything which is courageous. Had this new philosophy of force existed previously, the fairy tale of man would never even have begun. Man would have been afraid of every sea if it was stronger than his ships, of every field if it was bigger than his plough. The strength of man has entirely arisen out of contempt of strength: it was the more ready to fight the dragon the vaster it was, even if its jaws were the heavens and its eyes were the sun and moon.

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